

MOSCOW (New York Times) — Russia and Georgia have agreed to reopen their major border crossing, officials said, signaling the first thawing of ties between the countries since they went to war last year over a separatist enclave.

The crossing, at the Upper Lars checkpoint in the Caucasus mountains, has been closed since 2006, when relations began growing tense, in part because of efforts by the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, to align himself more closely with the United States.

Russia also banned imports of Georgian products, and cut air transportation links. In August 2008, war broke out after Georgia tried to retake South Ossetia, a separatist enclave that has close ties to Moscow, and Russian troops responded by invading Georgia.

The countries have not had diplomatic relations since then. The Kremlin insists that it will have no direct contact with Mr. Saakashvili, but it has lately expressed more willingness to lessen the pressure on Georgia.

Russia's president, Dmitri A. Medvedev, said this month that he was not opposed to restoring air links, though he did not formally propose doing so. A Georgian airline said that it would apply to the Russian authorities for permission to fly to Moscow from Tbilisi, the Georgian capital.

The pass at Upper Lars is the only legal highway crossing between Russia and territory controlled by Georgia, officials said. There are also crossings in South Ossetia and another separatist Georgian enclave,

Russia and Georgia agree to reopen major border crossing



This picture taken in July 2008 shows the construction area of checkpoint Verkhny Lars between Georgia and Russia. (AFP/File/Kazbek Basayev)

Abkhazia.

The Upper Lars crossing links Tbilisi with the Russian city of Vladikavkaz, and reopens the only direct route from Russia to Armenia, Georgia's neighbor to the south.

The agreement to open the border was mediated by Swiss diplomats. While it suggested some progress in relations, other events have underscored the tensions.

Georgia demolished a World War II me-

monial this month in the city of Kutaisi to make way for a Parliament building, causing an outcry in Russia, which called the move sacrilegious.

"This is one more attempt to erase the history of the peoples of the former Soviet Union, including the heroic history, from historical memory," Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin said Wednesday. He suggested that the monument be rebuilt in Moscow.

The Georgian Foreign Ministry released a statement saying the Georgian government revered the memory of World War II veterans but noted that the memorial was damaged and needed extensive renovation. It also said that Russia had the "immoral habit of permanently interfering in other countries' internal affairs."

Relations between Russia and Estonia were inflamed in 2007 when the Estonian authorities moved a prominent memorial.

The Kutaisi monument also turned into a domestic scandal after a young woman and her 8-year-old daughter were accidentally killed in the demolition blast.

Mr. Saakashvili responded by ending his visit to the Copenhagen climate meeting and returning to Georgia, where he dismissed the local governor and ordered an inquiry.

Attempted airplane bomber charged: U.S. official

WASHINGTON (Xinhua) — A Nigerian man, who has attempted to set off an explosive device on a Delta/Northwest international flight, has been officially charged, said the U.S. Department of Justice on Saturday.

"This alleged attack on a U.S. airplane on Christmas Day shows that we must remain vigilant in the fight against terrorism at all times," said Attorney General Eric Holder in a statement.

"Had this alleged plot to destroy an airplane been successful, scores of innocent people would have been killed or injured," he said.

The federal crime complaint came one day after Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, 23, failed in setting off an explosive device attached to his body when the Delta/Northwest Flight 253, with 278 passengers and 11 crew members on board, was approaching Detroit Metro Airport.

A preliminary analysis by the Federal Bureau of Investigation showed that the device contained PETN, a highly explosive substance. Investigators also found what appear to be the remnants of the syringe from the vicinity of Abdulmutallab's seat, which was believed to have been part of the device.

However, the malfunctioned device caused nothing but some smoke and fire on the suspect. All passengers but two survive without hurt.

Abdulmutallab required medical treatment to his second and third-degree burns, and was transported to the University of Michigan Medical Center after the plane landed, said the Justice Department.

According to the initial investigation, Abdulmutallab departed from Lagos, Nigeria, aboard a KLM flight and took the Delta/



Northwest Flight 253, with 278 passengers and 11 crew members on board, at the Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where he did not go through the secondary screening check.

Prior to the incident, Abdulmutallab went to the lavatory for about twenty minutes. After he returned to his seat, he claimed his stomach was upset and asked for a

blanket pulled over himself.

Only seconds later, passengers and crew heard popping noise similar to firecrackers and then smell an odor, while Abdulmutallab's legs and the wall of the airplane were seen on fire. They subdued him immediately and put off the flames with fire extinguishers.

The further investigation is still conducted by the FBI, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the Joint Terrorism Task Force.

U.S. authorities earlier confirmed that Abdulmutallab's name was not on the "no-fly" list but showed up in the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment that includes people with known or suspected contact or ties to a terrorist or terrorist organization.

A separate report said that Abdulmutallab's father, a banker in Lagos, reported to the U.S. embassy in Nigeria his son's radical views and possible activities several weeks before the incident.

During the investigation, the suspect claimed that he had ties with al-Qaeda and received the material and instruction to make an explosive device from members of the terrorist group in Yemen.

However, the FBI officials believed that he was just acting alone and did not officially belong to any organized terrorist groups.

Russian president optimistic on arms deal with U.S.

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said that nuclear arms control talks with the United States required some give-and-take on both sides and voiced optimism that a deal would be reached soon.

The agreement succeeding the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty has required painstaking work and tough negotiations, Medvedev said. He added that Moscow and Washington had failed to strike a deal by Dec. 5 when the START treaty expired because of the talks' complexity.

"The issue is very difficult," he said in a live interview with the heads of Russian television stations. "It's a treaty that would determine the parameters of the development and reduction of the strategic offensive potentials of the two largest

nuclear powers."

Between them, the two countries control 90 to 95 percent of the world's nuclear weapons.

At a summit in Moscow last July, President Barack Obama and Medvedev agreed to cut the number of nuclear warheads on each side to between 1,500 and 1,675 within seven years, as part of a broad new treaty.

Medvedev said Thursday that both Moscow and Washington had to make some concessions in the arms control talks.

Medvedev said that Obama's call for a nuclear-free world is a "beautiful and right goal," but added that movement toward it should be gradual and require other nations also to cut their nuclear arsenals.

A new strategic arms reduction treaty expected to be signed between Moscow

and Washington was "practically ready," said also Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Saturday, Xinhua reported.

"The (new) START treaty is practically ready. I hope the experts will finalize it quickly enough," said the Russian top diplomat in a TV interview.

Lavrov also said the new treaty "is based on some fundamentally new principles," such as "equal rights, parity, and reciprocal trust."

"For the first time in history the levels of strategic offensive arms will be unprecedentedly low," said the minister as quoted by the Itar-Tass news agency.

Lavrov said Russia-U.S. relations "do have prospects," due to a "new, decent economic dialogue in progress."

"Thus, we won't have to be bored next year," he added.

Winter weather leaves behind flooding concerns

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Snow and rain storms that have battered much of the country for days have started subsiding, leaving behind concerns about flooding in some areas.

Storms from Texas to the Upper Midwest dumped 23.9 inches of snow in Grand Forks, N.D., and 18 inches near Norfolk, Neb. In the East, higher temperatures and rains have started melting and washing away last week's record-setting snowfalls, threatening the region with flooding.

Authorities in southeast Missouri were

searching for a woman who washed away in a ditch on Christmas Eve as heavy rains showered the region. Witnesses saw her in the water west of Powe, Mo., and tried to assist her, said Sgt. Jody Laramore of the state Highway Patrol.

Shannon Fullmer drove two hours from his home in Freeport, Ill., to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport on Saturday to pick up his 12-year-old son. But the flight from New Jersey was delayed more than three hours.

Fullmer said he would wait "as long as I have to."

A few dozen flights were delayed and a few canceled Saturday afternoon in southern Wisconsin. Three to five inches of snow was expected by Sunday morning.

Flights also were delayed at the three major airports in the New York area, which was getting rain and patchy fog. Some travelers arriving at Newark Liberty International had delays of nearly 2 1/2 hours.



Russian president urges police reform

MOSCOW (AP) — President Dmitry Medvedev ordered reform of the country's Interior Ministry, saying it was a necessary response to police abuses that have angered Russians and eroded public trust in the government.

The move would streamline the ministry's structure and cut the number of police officers by one fifth by the start of 2012, Medvedev said in a decree released by the Kremlin.

It slashes the number of Interior Ministry departments, reduces the number of top police officials in Russian provinces, urges changes in police recruitment rules, and institutes measures to combat police corruption.

"We need sharp and serious changes," Medvedev said in a live interview with heads of three Russian television stations Thursday.

Human rights groups say that Russian police routinely use such methods as trumped-up charges, abuse, blackmail and torture.

Critics accuse the Interior Ministry of creating a system under which financial rewards and police promotions are often based on crime-fighting results that can be easily faked and manipulated.

Russians have also been alarmed by a recent deadly police shooting. In April, a Moscow police precinct chief killed two people and wounded seven others in a shooting spree in a supermarket and on the street outside, according to authorities.

King of Spain calls for unity

MADRID (Xinhua) — Juan Carlos, the King of Spain, called for unity in his Christmas message to the Spanish citizens broadcast on Christmas Eve.

All Spaniards should redouble their efforts to surpass the tensions, achieve economic growth, and create employment as soon as possible, and those efforts should be made through agreements between political, economic and social forces to allow maximum solidarity and to carry out necessary reforms, said the Spanish king.

Juan Carlos also urged Spanish citizens to coordinate efforts at the maximum level to reinforce the internal cohesion and exterior projection, because the security, progress and welfare of the Spaniards largely depend on efficient protection and promotions of their interests in the world.

The King also referred to the fact that Spain will take over the European presidency for the fourth time from Jan. 1 as the Lisbon Treaty takes effect.

"It is of vital importance to obtain a more united and dynamic Europe in the world," he said

Russian nightclub death toll reaches 152

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian officials said the death toll from a nightclub fire in the Urals city of Perm almost three weeks ago has risen to 152.

The regional branch of the Emergency Situations Ministry said two women died of their injuries Thursday. It said in Friday's statement that 74 others remain hospitalized.

The blaze at the Lame Horse nightclub broke out on Dec. 5 when an indoor fireworks display ignited a plastic ceiling decorated with branches.

European Union wants Serbia to join

PARIS (UPI) — European Commission Vice President Jacques Barrot said the European Union wants Serbia to be a member, but it may take several years to finalize.

Appearing at a recent ceremony at the Serbian cultural center in Paris, Barrot urged Serbia to remain patient regarding EU membership, saying it could take five to seven years to accomplish, Serbian broadcaster B92 reported Saturday.

"We want Europe to really be Europe, and that will not be possible without Serbia," Barrot said.

The European Commission official also applauded the Serbian government for its efforts regarding visa liberalization with the European Union.

"It is good that you have someone like President Boris Tadic leading and a Deputy Prime Minister like Bozidar Delic, who will do a lot on that road," Barrot said.

"Many reforms and challenges are ahead of us. I can't say that everything will be easy, but I want to be reminded at the end of our trip that a Serbia that believes in itself is a Serbia that wins," he added.

Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, whose country holds the rotating European Union presidency, said "major reforms" are needed in Serbia and the membership path is "long." The country joins former Yugoslav republics, such as Croatia and Montenegro, who want to become members, as well as Iceland and Turkey, Bloomberg reported.

"I am convinced the Serbian application will be important not only for the development of Serbia, but for the region as a whole," Reinfeldt told reporters in Stockholm after Serbia handed in its formal EU application. "Serbia and its people will make an important contribution to the EU family."

Serbian President Boris Tadic said the Balkan nation will implement changes needed to join the bloc "as soon as possible," with 2014 a target date for accession. Fighting organized crime, finishing infrastructure projects and changes to the judicial system are all priorities, he said.

"I start my every working day with thinking about how to capture Mladic, and "that is my main task as president," he said in Stockholm. "We feel we are ready to complete this task" of negotiating entry, "and today I formally commit my country to those values and goals" of the EU.

"The western Balkans are part of Europe, that's always been France's position," French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said in Paris. "We had to overcome the opposition of the Netherlands who blocked it for ages. The arrest of Mladic remains our obsession."

A signing of the Stabilization and Association agreement, the trade accord with Serbia, was held up by the Netherlands, which demanded Mladic be delivered to authorities first. It dropped its objection at the beginning of this month.

The application comes a week after citizens of Serbia, Montenegro and the Republic of Macedonia won the right of visa-free travel to the EU.